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Testimony of Suzanne Miller on
SB 111 AN ACT
CONCERNING FUNDING FOR CHILD CARE PROGRAMS.

Members of the Appropriations committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on SB 111.

My name is Suzanne Miller of Clinton, CT and I am a co-owner of the Carrot Patch Early Learning Center in Hamden and the Carrot Patch-Shoreline in Clinton (and of the now-closed Cheshire Nursery School in Cheshire). I support SB 111 because we need on-going, substantial wage supplements and benefits for small private centers, nonprofit centers (including religious programs) and family child care providers so that they are able to continue to provide high quality care and education.

My daughter and I have operated early childhood programs in Connecticut since 2005, and have always prided ourselves on providing outstanding early care and education for infants through preschoolers. We have had a policy of hiring only experienced staff holding a Bachelor or Master degree for EVERY position, using a co-teacher model rather than a head teacher/assistant teacher model. We have staffed two full-time teachers in every classroom, only using college students for part-time help at the end of each 11 hour day. While many teachers have held degrees in early childhood education and elementary education, our teaching staff has also included social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, art therapists, and pediatric nurses—providing a wide range of expertise to draw upon for our children.

Sadly, we can no longer offer this level of high quality programs. During COVID we lost nearly our entire workforce, whether due to health concerns, caretaking of vulnerable family members, decisions to retire, or to pursue higher-paying and safer careers for which they were well qualified. We were forced to permanently close our Cheshire Nursery School in September 2020 due to the impossibility of finding qualified staff for even a single teaching position in time to open our fully-enrolled program at the start of that academic year.

In our remaining two programs we have been forced to hire workers without relevant education or experience—many on a part-time basis—just to try and keep classrooms open. Even with significantly increased wages, we are unable to retain or attract competent teachers. Historically we have had extremely low teacher turnover, but at this point, we are experiencing constant turnover of these new unskilled workers.

The impact on our program is extreme. It is simply not possible to provide the quality of care and education our children and families deserve. We have had to shorten the hours we can remain open each day, close classrooms, and under-enroll open classrooms to maintain ratios with less staff. All costs have skyrocketed—most notably the steep increase in wages, which makes up the single largest budget item. Costly state regulation and unfunded mandates continually increase the cost of operation. Parents are unable to shoulder increased tuition, and indeed raising rates while decreasing hours and quality of care is unconscionable.

Covid grant funds distributed by the state were essential, but rapidly expended during the times programs were forced to close, and when enrollment was extremely low as families slowly returned to the workforce. Currently, as with so many other centers, tuition income is inadequate to meet current expenses. Only unexpended SBA loan proceeds supplementing current tuition keeps us going from day to day. This is an unsustainable model, and without significant investment into the childcare system, the doors of these two centers will also close.

The impact on children is extreme. It is an uphill battle to meet our young students' varied needs with a staff largely unfamiliar with child development and lacking knowledge of developmentally-appropriate early childhood education methods. Staff shortages mean there is insufficient time to provide even rudimentary training, directors are constantly covering classrooms and unable to provide support (or do their administrative work), and the classroom experience is greatly diminished.

The constant turnover in staffing means children are unable to develop secure, trusting relationships with their teachers, or to enjoy the kind of predictable experience that allow them to thrive and learn. Less qualified staff means emphasis on supporting positive social-emotional development suffers, appropriate response to challenging behaviors and the ability to identify special needs is lacking.

The impact on the few remaining skilled teachers and directors is extreme. Highly qualified staff are burning out trying to carry the programs on their shoulders, and make up for the lack of skilled colleagues. Despite their commitment to children, these underpaid and overburdened teachers are increasingly making the rational decision to leave the field, which only serves to further exacerbate the problems.

The impact on families is extreme. The cost of early care and education is taking an ever-increasing portion of the family budget. At the same time, due to the shortage of experienced staff the quality of care is declining, having a negative impact on the current and future happiness and success of their children. The number of slots for children are shrinking, and even the available spaces are erratic as program hours are decreased and classrooms close, sometimes without warning. This puts parents' continued employment in ongoing jeopardy, and drains funds from availability to meet families' basic needs.

The bottom line is this: without substantial funding to the state's universe of licensed childcare providers sufficient to provide salaries and benefits to compete with public schools and other better resourced employers, and funds adequate to meet the true costs of providing quality care, the system will continue its death spiral. Our children will suffer, our families will suffer, our early childhood education workforce will disappear, and Connecticut will no longer be a state where families can live and prosper.